

Twenty-One: An Age of Body, Grief, and Threshold

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Twenty-one is an exciting and sometimes perilous age to experience and grow through. This creative nonfiction piece details my experience after turning twenty-one as I dealt with complications of body, grief, and threshold. The following narrative follows my year in a chronological, dated order while contending with these complications as they continually affect my experience. The piece is enhanced through the words and ideas of other authors that deal with the complications of being human. The result is a series of vignettes that detail the most important and meaningful moments of my year that speak to the larger experiences of body, grief, and threshold.

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I want to thank my parents, Craig and Anna Priebe, for their continuous love, support, and belief in me through this year and this writing process. I also wish to thank Ella Donovan for being a source of inspiration and support during my drafting process and throughout our friendship.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my late grandmother, Lila Priebe, for her endless love and passionate devotion to beauty, both of which she gifted to her family during her lifetime. Her memory will continue to live on in cashmere sweaters, the smell of Coco Chanel perfume, and the loving imprint she left in the hearts of those lucky enough to have known and loved her.

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“When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe”

-John Muir (110).

Process Analysis

When I applied for the Honors 499 thesis class, I was still debating what I wanted to write about. I knew I wanted to do something outside the form of academic writing, and I wanted to engage some of the things I learned while pursuing a creative writing minor. Most of all, I wanted to talk about something that mattered. As I worked with Professor Dalton, I began narrowing down what my vision was. It went from a lofty philosophical discussion depending entirely upon the words of historically great thinkers to detailing my own life and experience. Using the personal format of creative nonfiction, I wanted to write about things that I struggled with as a young adult and I knew that other young adults were dealing with: concepts of Body, Grief, and Threshold.

For my research, I read a great deal of creative nonfiction, such as Susan Neville’s *Indiana Winter*, as I tried to understand how to effectively write and encounter the reader. When I began writing I struggled with telling the reader too much and forgetting to ground them in a scene. Professor Dalton advised me in creative writing motifs and gave me further creative nonfiction suggestions. I turned to great essayists, such as Joan Didion, both to further understand the art form as well as the subject matter of grief. I also pulled from some of my personal, favorite books I had read in the past such as Padraig Ó Tuama’s *In the Shelter*, which deals with the deep griefs of life and living as it observes how we can continue to move forward.

The writing helped me understand how I wanted to write my piece and was also cathartic in helping me understand what it is that I really want to say about my experiences.

I initially intended on writing three separate, longer essays on each topic, but I struggled to keep them separated from one another as the topics and their effects on my life kept weaving in and out of one another. I wrote about two drafts with my essays in this format but eventually threw them out as they didn't express what I wanted to say and were more of a panicked need to begin writing than anything else. However, I had to start writing, even if it was not what I wanted to say, to figure out what it was that I did want to say and how I wanted to say it.

Eventually, after reading a series of short stories, I realized that everything I had to say and show about these topics had occurred after turning twenty-one years old. I distilled the three separate essays into a series of short vignettes which allowed room for connection and interplay between the topics that the separation had not. It brings to the forefront how everything in life is inevitably connected to everything else, no matter how much one would wish they could organize and separate. Introspection and observation of oneself and life as a whole is not a matter of divide and conquer, but a willingness to throw oneself into a web of connections and follow each strand as it comes along. I tried to do as much within my own piece as I allowed the interweaving connections to keep the narrative moving forward.

At the time of writing, I thought I had a good grasp of these topics and their effect. I imagined I would have no problem writing about them and advising the reader on how to deal with them. My self-assurance of mature mastery would later crumble as I sat crying in Professor Dalton's office, explaining I could not show anyone the first draft of my Grief essay. The pain of grief was too pronounced and sewn into my body in ways I did not quite understand until that moment. Looking back, I believe that when I committed to this project, I subconsciously hoped

to make better sense of these ethereal pieces of life for myself through writing about them rather than telling someone else how they should deal with them. It is my hope, if I am lucky, that a piece of what I have written will strike a chord with somebody and maybe even help them understand their own life and its intricacies more deeply as we're all just trying to figure it out as we go along.

What follows is a series of vignettes that occurred after I turned twenty-one-years old on June 6, 2019. All of these vignettes illustrate themes of body, grief, and threshold. The theme of Body in this collection is defined as our relationship to physical bodies and their relationship to us. They are our life's ally that can ground us in times of trouble and yet they can become our unconscious enemy when they begin to work against us through chronic disease. Grief in this collection is both the immense grief of losing someone and the complications of feeling that occur within the process of learning to live with the grief itself as a constant companion. For the purpose of this essay, Threshold is defined not as a physical doorway, but as a metaphorical doorway that is either consciously or unconsciously passed through in life. It can be defined as an event or moment that marks a way of life before it happened and a markedly different way of life that occurred afterwards.

All of these experiences feed into one another to create the greater experience and to separate them is to lose the complicated reality of how meaningful, connected experiences create a life. They are nonlinear and always connect in ways that a moment may not state explicitly, but threshold is found between the lines of grief and grief is found between the lines of body and so it goes.

Works Cited

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Twenty-One: An Age of Body, Grief, and Threshold

June 26, 2019

The intense sunlight cascades through the thin ozone layer of Sydney, Australia. My brain feels foggy and breath isn't coming easily to my lungs as I breathe slowly in and out. My mother is sitting next to me as we stare out at the blue ocean of Manly Beach. I can sense that there is salt in the air and I feel a cool breeze lifting the large scarf I have pulled around my throat.

When I was little, I would always run into this ocean despite it being the middle of winter. I didn't care. I had to be in the cold rush of water. This crazy organism that would just envelop me. I was the kid that would hide in the middle of the hotel swim pool and hold my breath underwater in hopes that my parents couldn't get to me and I'd be able to stay forever.

Today, my body aches for the water, but my mind warns against it. My throat is burning and I'm recovering from a severe fever I had broken the night before. My mind wavered between sleep and consciousness as I thrashed in my sleep and contended with odd dreams. Hot sweat and cold chills enveloped my body all at once as my white blood cells grappled with the fever. I must have broken it at some point during the night as I remember barely waking up to hold my dad's hand as he said goodbye.

My grandmother had a stroke the day before and my grandfather had called my dad, crying. She was in the hospital but couldn't remember anything and just kept saying words that didn't bond together into sentences. She couldn't remember who my grandfather was despite their sixty-two years of marriage nor could she feed herself. We knew something like this was

coming, but we never expected a stroke. My grandma is a small, wiry lady with a gentle disposition, but a fiery tongue. Her softness, kindness, and love for lambs has granted her the affectionate nickname of Lambie among the family. She's also born in April, which makes her an Aries, which is also fitting. She has a wild stubbornness to her and a mean streak that can spit out in unexpected moments that are often uncalled for.

There's a habit of judgment among my dad's side of the family that makes everybody feel small and on guard with one another. There's almost a competition for the attention and approval of my two grandparents, particularly my grandpa. I noticed this dynamic as I got older and found higher expectations were placed on me that no one told me of, but I somehow failed to meet. I found myself longing for my mother's side of the family down under, where the house was old, creaky, and cold. It was a shack compared to my American grandparents' two stately homes in Edina, Minnesota, and Celebration, Florida, and yet I felt so much more comfortable. My Russian, immigrant grandad spoke to me with a heavy accent and my eccentric nana would yell at Australian politics on the television, giving unceremonious nicknames to political figures such as "ratty" and "fatty." Furniture was spare and you had to walk outside to reach the dunny (toilet), but I just felt cherished. I wasn't afraid of slipping up and I didn't question if I was thin enough, smart enough, or mature enough to be worth listening to.

My American grandmother, who now lay in a hospital bed in Florida, was at her best when I was a little kid that she could spoil with breakfasts in bed and wrap up in her arms for a hug. I used to sit on her bed and watch her put on lipstick in the mornings. I would always ask her if I could wear some lipstick. She smiled and put a little dollop of it on my lower lip and then taught me to rub my lips together in order to evenly spread it across. The thick matte of expensive lipstick stuck to my small lips in the most satisfying way. After her death I went into

that same closet in Minnesota and pulled out a tube of her deep, berry red lipstick and uncapped it. I stared at the familiar almond shape of a perfect tube of lipstick for a moment, before putting it back, and shutting the closet door. I wish we had been closer.

We lost touch when I was in my awkward middle school stage. She was a classic 1950s housewife who loved Coco Chanel perfume and decorating her house with expensive furniture. I feared liking anything feminine or being a part of anything traditionally meant for girls as I felt if I chose to be “girly” I couldn’t be smart. We spoke more as I had gotten older and I tried to make an effort to reconnect with her, but it didn’t always come particularly easily to us. I would often help her in the kitchen and clean up around the house. She called me her “little helper” and sometimes we would have long conversations. The best conversations were when she would talk about her childhood of growing up in a small, Minnesota town called Baliton where her family still lived. She talked about her three older sisters and her mother who was famous for her kindness and love. She remembered when her mom would get up on the kitchen table and dance the Charleston to her daughters' delight and they’d all stay up late drinking coffee and talking.

She used to live in a small house full of family, but now she lived in two, massive houses with only her husband whom she married when she was eighteen. The worst conversations we had were the ones where all she could talk about was how evil of a man he is. We didn’t understand at the time as she always seemed to be the one yelling at him, her voice full of venom. They were high school sweethearts and they’d been together for so long, so we assumed they had a handle on their own relationship. My grandpa had grown from small town farmer roots in Minnesota to a bigwig in the corporate world. He had made millions and was proud of how he represented the American dream. We knew he was a difficult man with his judgment of everyone and egocentrism, but we always assumed he would do the right thing by his family. We

loved them both, so it was difficult to listen to her gossip about him and we chalked her anger and venom up to being a byproduct of intense pain from her foot injuries.

Before I was born, my grandpa bought her a Vespa scooter. He loved motorized bikes like his Harley Davidson. My dad warned them against it, but neither of them were fans of acknowledging their age or how it might limit them. She got into an accident on her Vespa and broke an ankle. It healed eventually, but as she got older blue veins darkened to purple around her ankles and her small feet would swell into angry, red balloons. She had to wear shoes two sizes too big to accommodate them. She was in immense pain, but she would hide it. She refused to go to the doctor despite the family's insistence that she must go or risk serious health issues. She wouldn't listen and would simply become deeply angry with anyone who tried to push her to go. My mum suspected she had a blood disease of some kind and we'd been waiting for something to happen that would either kill her or force her out of her own stubbornness as we helplessly watched from the sidelines. That moment had finally come.

I may have broken my fever in the night, but I can barely walk a mile without having to ask my mum to stop and let me rest on a bench or in a coffee shop. We took a ferry across the harbor and got some lunch before sitting on the concrete barrier that prevents ocean flooding from reaching the streets. We watch seagulls dive into the ocean and surface moments later with fish in their beaks and we are wary of the seagulls thrashing behind us as they fight over a chip (French fry) dropped by some tourist. Surfers are running along the beach searching for the best waves and sliding out in the ocean water on their boards like seals across ice.

Dad flew directly to Florida from Sydney two days earlier than planned. Mum and I stayed as it would have been too expensive to change all of our flights. My dad is sick with the

same flu as I, even though his symptoms seem to be less severe. I woke up from my fevered state at six a.m. to hold his hand as he said he loved me. I told him I loved him too as I watched he and my mum leave the hotel room to head for the airport, toting his bags behind them. Sitting by the ocean now, I'm sad for my grandma and wonder if I'll ever get to speak to her again and if she'll remember me or not, but I'm also sad for my dad. This trip was his last hurrah before he goes into surgery in a couple of weeks to remove a cancerous tumor from his colon. It's a procedure he's been preparing for since February with constant treatments of chemotherapy and radiation. This trip was a small gift for him as he prepares for the next stage of his fight, but now the duty of his family calls and he's off to answer it. My dad a great man who will always do what needs to be done for his family, regardless of the cost to him.

Mum and I sit silently as we absorb the peace of the waves and giant trees that surround us. I squint my eyes and try to imprint the memory into my head as the harsh sunlight, unfiltered by the thin ozone layer above Australia, fills everything with a white, golden light. The fragility of life awaits us back home.

July 16, 2019

Hot, summer sunlight streams into the ceiling-high windows of my local artisanal coffee shop. I look behind me to see that I've arrived just in time to beat the line of cafe regulars

standing behind me, anxious to claim their regular table. A barista named Ryan stands in front of me. He has a sleeve of tattoos and is wearing boxy glasses that look like they're from the '80s.

"How's your dad doing?" he asks as he punches in my family's regular morning order: *one tall cold brew for me, one latte for my mum, and one house brew for my dad.*

"He's through surgery. They're monitoring him now," I answer. My brain is foggy and tired as I prepare for the day ahead. Grab coffee, drive across town to Ball Memorial Hospital, visit Dad, go to work, go teach swim lessons, go back to work until 4, go back to the hospital, go home.

"Tell him we're thinking of him," Ryan responds with a sad, half-smile before handing me my cold brew. I smile back in response and stand back to allow the rabid line of coffee addicts forward.

I hold an uneven tray of recycled paper in one hand and my car keys in the other. The parking lot of the hospital is always filled with cars. I never have the patience to try to fight for a spot closer to the front. People are always so aggressive in this parking lot. I'm too afraid of getting in an accident. Their road rage I will forgive momentarily as hospitals are not places of clear thinking and patient reason when it comes to family and friends. It's a place of survival, rushing ambulances, and hard decisions. Emotions are raw and unfiltered as we all suffer inside of our own fears and misfortunes. It's easy to talk about compassion and patience in an upscale yoga class, it's harder when you're anticipating the next worst thing that could be coming.

I look up and the hospital door looks as if it's eons away. The heat clinging to me makes the daily push towards the hospital doors feel like my Sisyphus-like burden. My mum and I have

begun calling it the green mile. I didn't know what that meant until I looked up the movie with Tom Hanks, but I knew my walk to the hospital felt long and arduous as I approached a place where I felt demoralized and sad. It may be a dark exaggeration to call the long sidewalk leading to the hospital doors such a name, but it holds a feeling of weight that seemed to shackle me through those endless weeks.

My dad was diagnosed with stage three colon cancer in February of 2019. He went through aggressive chemo and radiation treatments for six months leading up to his first surgery. He had surgery this past week to cut out the tumor using tiny robotic hands that operate like a video game pad. There was a career fair in the hospital during his stay there. I was able to work the same machine that had been used to cut a cancerous tumor out of his body. I operated the tiny hands to place small plastic hoops on a series of spikes.

The surgery was successful, but his digestive system has had trouble handling food. He had to have a tube fed through his nostrils, down his throat, and into his stomach to pump out anything in his digestive tract. It all went into a small cup hooked up to the wall behind his bed. He says he's never felt more dehumanized in his life than living with that tube in his body for three days as we watched TV. To this day, he'll still groan or stiffen when he sees specific commercials on TV. They remind him too much of those miserable days in the hospital.

I walk through the rotating front door of the hospital and welcome the cool air conditioning as it latches onto the beads of sweat that formed on my body during my pilgrimage. It's been a hot summer so far and it hasn't seemed to let up. The heat adds to the haziness I've felt these past couple of days of simply doing. I simply show up in the places where I'm expected-- coffee shops, hospital rooms, and work -- yet, I never feel as if I'm there. I don't even escape into my mind or imagination; my life is simply happening and pulling me along with it,

like a fish net pulling garbage, dirt, and fish along the seafloor. These days are blurry. The strongest memory I have is walking back and forth along this strip of concrete leading in and out of the hospital to my car.

I step out of the elevator and round several corners. The smell of sanitizing alcohol burns the hairs in my nose as I walk through the building and it seems to cling to my body and clothes even when I leave. The smell is chemical and numbs any natural smell once I've left the building. Only the chlorine I will dip into later for a swim will cancel out this chemical, hospital smell.

When our family received the news of his diagnosis, we were shocked. He more so than anyone. He felt betrayed by his own body. He had treated it correctly, cared for it more than the average American and yet one of the most feared diseases of our era had dug its claws into his body; silently and in secret. My dad is one of the healthiest guys I know. He's always cared about what foods he was putting in his body and has gone through periods of time following the "clean diet, one that involves no sugar, no caffeine (he followed this one loosely), no dairy, and no gluten. Our kitchen counter is covered in natural supplements that he takes. He lifts weights or goes for a run in the early mornings. I remember waking up for school and always hearing the steady thump of his feet hitting the treadmill in our living room.

I knock on the double doors of his room before slowly opening them. He's sitting reclined in his hospital bed wearing the red bathrobe I've grown up seeing him wear. He looks up at me, the tube still emerging from his nose reaches behind him and drips a greenish liquid from his stomach into a cup placed behind his bed.

“Good morning, sweetie!” He says, quietly, but with excitement as a smile spreads across his face and he crinkles his eyes. I smile back and walk over to give him a kiss on the cheek and his coffee before sitting down to talk.

He asks what my plans are for the day and I lay out the monotonous schedule of work, lunch, work that’s fast approaching. I know he needs to hear about monotony and I’m sure he misses it while living inside of an awful, extraordinary circumstance. He tells me that he talked to Grandma last night. She’s in a nursing home, recovering from her stroke and completely coherent. She recovered soon after my dad and aunt flew out to Florida. They would sit together all day and talk which is how her memory came back to her. She and my dad had begun calling one another on a daily basis after he had to leave and come back for the surgery. She worried about her baby boy as he underwent cancer treatments and he worried about his frail mother who lay in a nursing home so far from the Midwest her two children inhabited.

The small, thin thread of family spreads across the country as we try to be here for one another in the few ways that we can, whether, through a visit, a call, or a bouquet sent to a hospital room. We talked to one another and that’s what got us through it in the end.

July 21, 2019

My thighs and lungs protest as I swing my hiking pole in front of me and dig it into the sunlit dirt angling ever up and up as I climb. The earth is soft from recently melted snow and the wind around me is whistling as I climb higher and higher up. My friend, Sam, is out of sight as she scouts the best way up to the peak of Table-Top Mountain near Crested Butte, Colorado.

My lungs are working overtime and I feel a coolness sitting at the bottom of them. It's the same feeling I'd have after swimming a 200 IM in high school competitions. It means my lungs have been pushed to a limit that they don't like, but I know they'll keep going if I ask them to. I will often listen to their protests first though as I pride myself on being a good listener.

I see Sam's pink jacket as she jogs carefully back down to me, a pink blip among the greens, browns, blues, and whites of this mountain range. We're not far from the top now. I've only got a couple of feet to go.

"We're almost there." She says to me smiling and I try to take a deep breath, but I'm finding it harder and harder the more altitude we gain. I've gone from the 932-foot elevation of Muncie, IN to the 8,909-foot elevation of Crested Butte and I'm slowly heading towards a 13,794-foot peak. My lungs have been champs up until this point and I haven't thrown up or had to be placed in an acclimation chamber. My body has adjusted well to each challenge I've thrown at it, but it's asking me to rest.

"Could we sit down for a sec?" I ask her as sunlight streams down from the clear blue sky. She smiles and says of course before taking off her pack and sitting on the grass below, looking out from the face of the mountain and into the expanding distance ahead. I follow suit and my lungs and thighs gratefully rest a moment. I take a swig of water before laying my pack beneath my head and allowing my body to lie down completely as I overlook a magnificent landscape of mountains, lakes, and the clear blue sky ahead of us. The grass surrounding my

body is green and fresh, dotted with pink, yellow, and purple wildflowers. The flowers are incredibly tiny and simple, but they hold a person's attention as they grow in such an odd climate so high in this cold air. They can withstand the cold and the altitude and still spring up in bright colors that hikers marvel at.

I feel a tap on my shoulder and Sam offers me some dried fruit and beef jerky her family makes themselves. I take a bite of the jerky and a perfect blend of savory and salty engulfs my tongue and brings a sense of substance to my stomach. I follow it with a swig of water and some dried mango. Everything tastes much clearer up here and I can never again eat beef jerky as none will ever compare to that batch. Beef jerky, for me, will always belong to that moment.

Sam and I lie in the wildflower grass and just stare out at the ever-expanding earth below us. We're up so high. The sun is washing over us and our skin, creating a warm contrast to the cool of the air around us. This moment right before the peak and among the wildflowers will be one of the most visceral memories I hold. It is a moment of respite between the tragedies of my summer. It was the first time in a long time I felt my age and as if life can be a joyous, light, and fun thing.

"You ready?" Sam asks me as she smiles. I nod and pull my pack back onto my body. My legs ache in small protest at having to continue working and I feel painful blisters forming at the corners of my pinky toes, but I feel a sense of renewal as we continue rising towards the peak. The sun falls behind a small cloud.

August 8, 2019

"Life changes in the instant. The ordinary instant"

-Joan Didion (3).

I'm sitting in the coffee shop that my parents and I frequent every weekday at 7 AM, on the dot. We've been coming to this shop at this time for the past three years. We're a family that loves routine and ritual. The hot August sunshine is lighting up the whole shop and there are fake, yellow flowers that sit between us. We're all a bit groggy despite the sunshine, and I'm mentally preparing for another day of sitting in a university office with no windows. I'm a student worker in the Intensive English Institute at Ball State University. I input data, check out books and electronics to the teachers, and make copies. The job is pretty calm during the school year and downright dead in the summer. I like the job, but I miss seeing the sunshine as I sit inside all day.

I'm wondering what book I'll start reading to make the day go by faster. There's a hot summer lull to my thought that I'm trying to stoke with the bitter, black coffee on my tongue. My final year as an undergraduate begins in two weeks and I'm looking forward to my final year of undergraduate work as a History major.

My dad's phone begins ringing abruptly, the light and cheeky theme song from the Austin Powers soundtrack fills the vaulted ceilings of the coffee shop around us. We all jump at the brunt intrusion upon our quiet repose. My dad's hand jolts quickly to his pocket and he answers the phone.

"Hello?" He asks, not recognizing the number. "This is Craig Priebe." There's a pause and his face looks severe as his brow furrows and he quickly glances up at me before standing. My mum's head is swiveling between him and me slowly. She and I share a look.

My grandma, Lambie, was supposed to go into surgery today for her foot, which is killing her (literally). The doctors say she has a blood disease and they have been trying to help, but she'll need surgery if she hopes to survive. She'll lose her foot, but she's had a small military force of friends encouraging her that she still has life to live and Christmases to enjoy with her small family. My grandfather is adamantly against it and my dad has yelled at him several times to leave her alone and let her make her own decisions. My dad says that my grandpa refuses to believe that she's recovered from her stroke despite the fact that she has. He talks about her as if she's already dead, but she isn't, and the rest of the family has rallied behind keeping her alive at all costs.

The next step to recovering is getting rid of this infectious foot. She was going to do it the day before, but she was scared and overwhelmed by Grandpa's extreme insistence that she decide that exact moment. She changed her mind and said she didn't want to talk on the phone last night. With this sudden call coming in early in the morning, my first instinct is that she's gone in for emergency surgery early this morning and has died on the table due to her frailty and age.

My brain is suddenly at sharp attention as I watch my dad standing upon the threshold of the backdoor exit of the coffee shop. He stands with one foot inside the cafe and one foot on the pavement step outside in the summer heat. I watch his lips as he looks outside, not really seeing but focusing on the voice on the other end of the phone line. I can't hear his voice over the folk music playing overhead, but I see his lips move and his head jerk in disbelief as I can only make out one word.

"Dead?"

I don't process the observation. I just speak quickly and concisely, like a notification.

"Someone's dead," I say to my mum as she watches me. Her face knits with concern and panic as she suddenly stands and starts busying herself with the two tables we had pulled together. She attempts to pull them apart as I pick up our coffee mugs and plates, placing them inside of the designated wash basket directly behind us. We say nothing. She and I hurry outside into the bright, orange morning sun. My dad is standing by our car now.

My dad continues speaking on the phone and my mum and I try to piece together who it is. Our first instinct is that Grandma's foot killed her in the nighttime, but my dad keeps using the pronoun "he." My mum and I ask the same question of each other.

"Maybe it was Grandpa," I say. She nods with concern written upon her face and looks at my dad again. My dad has said for a long time that he knows his father would never go down the route of a nursing home. That he's the type to take his life into his own hands. My dad thanks whoever is on the other end and hangs up. He shakes his head while he presses the end button on the phone and sighs out a small breath before speaking.

"My dad shot my mom and then himself this morning."

August 9, 2019

"So even if we blame God, what do we do with sin, this life in a broken world? How do we respond with responsibility when responsibility itself isn't enough to overcome the

complication of being human or to hurdle the devastating ways we hurt each other, even when we wish to love each other, never mind when we wish harm? Hello to the difficulty of loving”
-Pádraig Ó Tuama (167).

We arrive in Florida in the late morning. It was a quick, but laborious flight. Everything feels laborious in these moments. We have a reservation for a hotel but stop at my grandparents’ house on the way there. We need to pick up the key my grandfather left in an obvious place, having constantly thought himself invincible. We knew there were several people who knew where it was and who had seen the wads of cash my grandfather left around the house.

The atmosphere is hot and muggy as we drive through the architectural splendor that is Celebration, Florida. When I say splendor I mean cookie-cutter houses larger than any single family would need, towering over newcomers like watchtowers filtering out anyone who makes less than \$750,000 a year. My eyes glaze over the perfectly manicured grass that used to feel like razor blades on my feet when I was younger. I was used to the soft grasses of Indiana that caressed my feet lovingly as I played in my mother’s garden. Not this arid grass that warned me to keep off just like the perfect little picket signs towering over it.

My dad turned the corner of the street and now to my right there is a man-made pond that sits across from my grandparents’ home. The news outlets had been all over the murder-suicide yesterday. We’d looked it up online and saw the police had built a barricade that ran across to the pond. We speculated on what that meant. Did he shoot himself across the street? Did he shoot himself, miss, and then try to drown himself? The detective would later tell us that the news outlets were wrong; he shot himself in the backyard. They had extended the crime scene for reasons I forget, but I didn’t know this until later. All I could imagine was what the lake looked like the morning of tragedy and wondered if the sunrise had been orange or pink.

It's the normalcy of everything that really got to me. How the world kept on spinning when I felt like everything inside of me had come to a halt. There were still people walking around the lake as normal. Just three days ago I had been crying about the fact that I didn't know what I wanted to do after college. Now that seems like something silly to be crying about. When Joan Didion's husband died from a sudden stroke she deliberated on the odd normalcy within which great tragedy is cocooned: "...Confronted with sudden disaster we all focus on how unremarkable the circumstances were in which the unthinkable occurred, the clear blue sky from which the plane fell, the routine errand that ended on the shoulder with the car in flames, the swings where the children were playing as usual when the rattlesnake struck from the ivy" (4). It often makes me think of how I spend my days in routine and normalcy while the lives of many other people are falling apart at that same moment.

We parked in front of the house and my dad found the key we feared would be the sport of anyone who watched the news and knew that the homeowners were dead. He opened the door and the sun bent away. The inside of the house was cool and dark. The massive grandfather clock that my grandmother loved and grandfather abhorred stood in the hallway. She loved its beauty and the gentle tick. He hated how it ticked when he stretched at 3 AM like he was still in bootcamp. I could see the pool glistening in the far-off windows. My dad entered first and I approached slowly behind him. The police had been here and taken whatever notes my grandfather had left, including the suicide note. The quiet and stillness of the house after such horrific events felt off and I hurried into the house more quickly, maybe hoping to shake off the discomfort I felt by immersing myself in the space more fully. There's nothing to fear, I told

myself, it's over. I want to get the pain over with, like jumping headfirst into the cold ocean in hopes of quicker acclimation rather than drawn-out shivering.

"They didn't take the bed away." I hear my dad say as I watch him round the corner and open the door to the backyard. My eyes glance into the far-left corner and I catch a glimpse of the separate hospice bed my grandmother had used. It's covered in a deep red, which turned to purple. It's so dark. I lose my breath and tears prick my eyes as I hurry into a corner, out of sight from the room and take quick, panicked breaths. I hold myself around the stomach and try to calm down.

At the time, and even now, it's odd that I don't hate my grandfather for what he did. I'm angry. I'm upset. It's unforgivable. But I still don't hate him. Grief is complicated enough as an experience, but to feel deep anger for one of the people I'm grieving is a hurricane I never thought I would have. If he were alive, I think that I would hate him with everything I have. He's somehow escaped that through death or maybe through the forced recognition that there are no pure villains.

As I had packed in preparation for this trip, I tried to think of something that could comfort me. A book, a movie, a poem, anything. I was in desperate need of comfort from something that I didn't need to comfort in return. I don't read or partake in many sad things, at least not things that deal with grief and loss. The only book I could think of was *In the Shelter* by Padraig O Tuama, a gay, Catholic Irishman who struggles with his own identity, faith, and loss. He found shelter in saying hello to the difficult aspects of life. He says hello to the here and now in hopes of having a conversation with what we struggle facing (3). The first time I read it I was searching for counseling in my sexuality, but didn't really find what I was looking for. When I picked it up off my shelf in a hurry and brought it to Florida with me, I didn't realize how much

it could help. It was the only book that could hold me at that moment. I strongly believe that we can meet books at the wrong time and then later find them again at the right moment, like the timing of a good relationship.

After Pádraig Ó Tuama's mother called him and told him that his childhood best friend had killed himself, he walked to a store and began reading *The Lord of the Rings*. He kept re-reading the part where Gandalf had been killed and the company was mourning him with song. As Pádraig says, "Hello to the need for shelter. Hello to the stories that shelter us" (4).

I don't necessarily believe in God with a capital G, but I do know that life and being human is a complication that I will never wrap my brain around. I sometimes feel crazy for not hating my grandfather when the situation seems so black and white.

Ó Tuama discusses the black and white view people have of Judas from the Bible with uncommon generosity. It isn't forgiveness, but it's an attempt to understand the human inside instead of characterizing the monster:

If one particular reading of him is taken, he is the anti-purpose to the purpose of God in Jesus of Nazareth. If another reading is taken, he is a thief who was in with the crowd of disciples for his own selfish purposes.

Both of these readings are convenient because they paint a clear picture. He is like Voldemort or Sauron or any number of the malevolent characters in the texts by which we feed our lives and imagination. It is clear, however, that this convenience needs to be inconvenienced. It is usually fruitful to assume that most people do what seems reasonable to them at the time, most of the time.

I am feeling the need to repeat myself, probably for my own benefit.

Most people do what seems reasonable to them at the time, most of the time. (93)

The choice my grandfather made was far from unreasonable. It was selfish madness, but I remember the last time I spoke with him over the phone a week before the event. He had done something odd to his TV and couldn't watch the news as he normally would. I'm the chosen tech

genius as I'm the youngest in the family and I tried to talk him through fixing it. I had never heard him sound the way he did. Demoralized and so depressed it left craters in my heart. I recognized the sound of depression I've heard in my own voice and the voices of people I've loved, but I'd never heard the heaviness of depression crush someone the way I heard it in his voice. It was ragged and I could almost hear how he just seemed to be dragging himself forward with each breath despite his amazing health. The confident, self-proclaimed patriarch of the family sounded half dead. I remember hanging up the phone and feeling deep sadness for him, but I made the assumption that he'd find his way through the mud of self-defeat. I didn't believe there to be another choice.

My grandfather made an atrocious choice, but I still try to remember the human within him. I feel sorry for him. I feel ashamed that I feel sorry for him. He betrayed our family and the high school sweetheart he married and lived with for 64 years. I still feel sorry for him and wish I could tell him he was loved and there were other choices to be made. There was a different way to live still. There's always another choice.

I wonder at the capacity of humans to see the human inside of one another. The strength and empathy it takes to look at someone who has killed and say "I see you. I see the complications inside of you and I can never hope to understand them or forgive them, but I recognize that you're still a human. And that we're all capable of terrible and wonderful things at the same time."

Ó Tuama calls it the shadow: "The awful truth is that our mixed intentions sometimes have the unmixed impact of terror. It doesn't justify the intention, but it goes a long way to creating understanding. Hello to the awful shadow. It has much to teach us" (96).

August 15, 2019

"Tell me about despair; yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on..."

-Mary Oliver *Wild Geese* (110.6-7).

I place a stack of paper in the expensive, gigantic copy machine in the Intensive English Institute's office at Ball State. I hear laughter and rapid talking coming from the break room behind my desk. There are cake and food welcoming the teachers back for the beginning of fall semester. I got back from Florida and the crime scene a day ago as I have to prepare for classes beginning the next week. People at work know my grandparents died. I found this out when a few people came up to hug me and offer their sympathies. They know my grandparents died, but they don't know how.

I don't know if it's right for me to answer truthfully or to avoid giving details altogether. I don't know what the line between privacy and denial is. In all truth, I want to tell people. I want to say it out loud and let them know, not because I want to burden them with something so awful, but I'm still trying to understand it and make it real for myself. I want people to understand how odd it is to be grieving and hating at the same time.

The copy machine spits out 20 copies of whatever syllabus I had placed in it. The machine presents the papers to me and signifies that it is in fact, finished. It's a very clear communicator. I grab the stack of papers and move quickly into the break room to place them in the corresponding mailbox. All of the teachers are standing around the room laughing and talking. I smile. It's good to hear cheer. I thought I would hate seeing people happy for a little while, but I find it relieving. I can feel the muscles in my neck relax as somebody laughs.

I place the papers in a mailbox and turn around to see one of the IEI professors has come up to me. He's a quiet one who doesn't ask for too many copies, but he always says hello when I'm sitting at my desk. His face looks concerned, but kind.

"Elianor, I'm so sorry about your grandparents. It is so rare for both to die at the same time, how does that happen?" Genuine confusion knits his face. The truth feels like such a burden to be placing on someone who hardly knows me. I haven't even been able to tell my closest friends. I don't want to dampen their worldview at the moment. I need their cheer and light. My mouth begins moving before I have a moment to think.

"It was a murder-suicide," I acquiesce as my face contorts with apology. The teacher, Miguel, steps back as his eyes close and mouth gapes open in shock. He places one hand on his chest before bowing his head. It all happens in half a second, but it's imprinted clearly in my head. His body responds so truthfully to the shock of it.

"I am so sorry," he says solemnly. I expect him to either end it there or excuse himself as soon as he can. I'm an emotional coward. I will run away as soon as I feel big emotions coming. I can't handle them. I don't know how to. He looks up at me and continues speaking.

"In one day, I lost my sister, her husband, and their two children in an air raid. I know what it feels to lose loved ones to violence." I'm taken aback by this. I knew he was from Iran, but I didn't know this about his family. He offers me a hug and solemn smile before releasing me and allowing me to return to my desk. I can't cry as I begin working on the next set of copies, but I feel a small weight lift from my shoulders.

September 2019

“We all carry trace fossils within us – the marks that the dead and the missed leave behind. Handwriting on an envelope; the wear on a wooden step left by footfall; the memory of a familiar gesture by someone gone, repeated so often it has worn its own groove in both air and mind: these are trace fossils too. Sometimes, in fact, all that is left behind by loss is trace – and sometimes empty volume can be easier to hold in the heart than presence itself”

--Robert Macfarlane (78).

In the book *Underland* Robert Macfarlane talks about trace fossils, fossils where the subject has left an imprint on the environment around them. Examples might be a dinosaur’s footprint or a hole in the earth burrowed by an ancient worm. As defined by Macfarlane, “A trace fossil is a bracing of space by a vanished body, in which absence serves as a sign” (78). In the days after her death, I found myself surrounded by the trace fossils of my grandma in both material and memory.

There was a blue, gold, and pink-hued rug that sat on the floor of the room Lambie had designated for me in her Minnesota home. The room sat directly across from my grandparents’ room. When I was young I would wake up and slip over there as soon as I could to climb into bed with my grandmother where she would bring me breakfast in bed on a wicker bed-stand while I watched her put on her lipstick in the large closet mirror. My grandmother had a series of rugs she placed all over the house and after her death, each member of my small family would end up taking one or a few. Grandma had great taste.

My dad and I silently roll up the rug filled with golden stems and pink flowers before pulling it together with clear tape and placing it inside of the car to drive 12 hours back home to

Indiana. I unroll it alone and silently in my room back home, laying it out across the length of my wooden floor. It matches the blue and yellow flowery wallpaper that decorates the walls around me. I'll later joke with my friends that anything nice in my room was inherited from my grandma. A couple of days after laying the rug out in my room I find a small, circular dog treat on it. It was one of the treats Grandma would always give to her Maltese dog, Mr. Pip, a small ball of white fluff. He was her only real companion during the final years of her life as my grandpa had become more and more withdrawn and intolerable. She would take solace in spoiling Mr. Pip with Canadian bacon sliced into checkered squares and letting him drink ice cold water. She spoiled him and he loved her with all his little body could muster, which was quite a bit. He was still alive after the shooting, thankfully. We picked him up from animal control and took him to a kind family who already knew and loved him. He got another chance at a very happy life.

I pick up the treat and throw it in the pink trash can sitting next to the rug. I begin putting lotion on my face when I feel a wetness on my cheeks. Tears are streaking down my face and I have to lie down on the rug for a moment and sob before picking myself back up and going to class. It's the small things I don't expect to affect me that push all of my emotions out like a wave through my body and they recede as quickly as they come.

On another sunny day, I've decided to Marie Kondo my house. Piles of clothes sit around me in heaps as I hold different items in my hands and try to discern if they spark joy or not. There's a certain chaos I feel in myself and in the physical space around me as my room is torn apart and I finally deal with hidden items I've placed in corners. I'm going through the many journals that I've collected over the years as I love journals, but struggle to fill them. I come

across a journal with a small lamb sticker sitting on the front of it, typing away at a computer. It was a scrapbook journal I had made for my grandmother. The name “Lambie” is emblazoned on the front in my attempts at calligraphy two years ago. I had found the journal in her closet in Florida and brought it home. I couldn’t open it at the time. It was hard enough going through her clothes and perfumes; I was scared to find out that she had used the journal a great deal or that she hadn’t used it at all. So, I threw it in my suitcase and forgot about it.

I hold the black leather in my hand and take a deep breath as I think. *You can do this. You’ve grieved. You can handle it.* I open the journal and flip through a couple of pages, glassy-eyed and tense. There’s no writing in it. She hadn’t used it. There was relief and hurt as I allowed the pages to cascade in front of me like a waterfall before they caught and opened up to a part of the book that held foreign and sturdy objects. Three postcards, each filled with my own messy, cursive writing from Norway, Sweden, Prague, and Scotland. I’d sent them a year and a half ago while on a solo trip. She’d kept them. A wave of warm emotion rushes up through my stomach, chest, throat, and finally reaches my eyes as tears begin falling and my body hiccups in waves of sobs. I close the book and lie down on the rug I’d brought back from Minnesota and let the emotions do what they will with me.

I’ve never felt closer to my grandmother than now, when she was absent from the living world around me. I often ask if that makes me a bad person or granddaughter. I’ve become almost painfully aware of her in everything as I attempt to unpack the trace fossils brought back from her home in Florida and Minnesota. I’m trying to desperately hold onto a semblance of the past that held a person who was now gone while the timing of my life was pushing me aggressively into the next stage. These small pieces of her that I would find weeks and sometimes months later would snap me back to my grief no matter how far forward I would feel

I have moved. I've grown up in a culture that says everything is linear. I had a false hope that if I kept moving forward the pain of grief would stop. I thought that I would grow up and out of it. I've come to believe that grief is not a feeling, but a state of being that doesn't quite stop. It shifts and changes form like me, but it's always sitting inside of me.

Being able to see the traces of her and know that she was real and not simply inside of my memory will both hurt and heal. The reminder that she was there and is no more builds a loneliness and comfort that manages to buoy me through an unpredictable storm of feeling I have never faced before.

September 21, 2019

“The world is indeed full of peril, and in it there are many dark places; but still there is much that is fair, and though in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater.”

-J. R. R. Tolkien (*Lord of the Rings II*, 6).

I move across the open space of my bedroom in the house my dad is currently fixing up to later rent out to college students. I can handle the dust and construction material since I can live off-campus, for free, and not with my parents. I carry folded clothes from my bed to my nearby closet as sunlight drifts into my comfort-filled room with pictures and artworks covering my walls. It's the sanctuary of an introvert. I listen to my music and fill the area with what I find to be beautiful and comfortable. Three large windows fill the space with the soft light of the evening that slowly approaches. I'm thinking of the essay that I have to write for my African history class. It's due in three days and I haven't begun it yet. I allow myself a small mental tantrum about the unfairness and stupidity of the assignment (the assignment is neither unfair or stupid, I'm simply lazy and stubborn when I'm told to do something versus when I choose to do something) when I glance up at the corkboard in the corner of my room.

I've recently changed the media on it so it doesn't blend into the room as easily as it once had. My eyes are still caught by the differences in it. There are a couple of Polaroid photos of me with my parents and of friends that live far away sitting in various corners. There's a natal chart that tracks the position of stars at my birth and supposedly tells me who I am in this lifetime. My

eye is pulled to the drawing my cousin gave me. It's a small hummingbird drinking nectar from vibrant flowers. It sits next to a picture of my grandmother bending down with her arms spread as a 6-year old me, clad in pink, runs into them. My arms are similarly outstretched as I look forward to the coming embrace.

My cousin drew our entire family a set of hummingbirds as a gift. My aunt, the day the police called her and told her the fate of her parents, had sat out in her backyard in the Minnesota sunshine. She told us that while she sat out there a hummingbird flitted down towards her and simply looked at her for a couple of minutes before buzzing away. She was surprised as she never sees hummingbirds in her backyard. She was even more surprised when it came back and did the same thing again. It simply buzzed around her as the two watched one another. It happened three times in total. She was convinced it was Lambie there to tell her she was finally free from the pain of her body and the pain of an unloving, crazy partner. She's a hummingbird.

My mum would later talk about the small hummingbird that visited the front garden of our house about a week later.

"She's come back to check on us. She wants us to know that she's ok and to tell us we'll be ok too," my mother said with a tilt to her head and a melancholy smile as she gazed out at the purple morning glories reaching towards the sun.

We would later go through my grandparents' house in Minnesota and find pictures of hummingbirds covering the walls, little, decorative dishes, and even small pieces of jewelry. My aunt took a necklace that had a small hummingbird covering its purple surface as a small memory and reminder that Lambie is free and no longer in pain.

Grandma was a devout Christian woman, probably the only one in the family. I'm not religious and neither are my parents, aunt, or cousin. As I hang up my green jacket, I think about

what I wish would come after death. I wish that after death we receive another chance. I would hope for a form of reincarnation where my grandmother can have another chance at life, the chance to make different choices that were for herself and not just for her husband or family. She had turned down a full scholarship to go to college and become a teacher, a great feat for a small-town girl in the 1950s and a career I think she would've excelled in with her gentle disposition and love of children. I wish she had made that choice instead of following her husband to his college and making her life about supporting him. I hope that she'll get another chance to choose herself. That's what I would wish for her and the whole of humanity: another chance.

I turn around to grab the next article of clothing when something catches my eye. Above my bed there sits a large window that looks into my backyard. There's an electrical wire that connects to the outer right corner of my window and flows back across the length of the yard. On the wire, looking into my window sits a ruby-throated hummingbird. I stand frozen for a moment as I watch it. I have seen hummingbirds in my neighborhood before, but never has one perched on this wire or come so close to my window and I've never seen one do it since. The little creature just continues to stare at me for what feels like forever and I simply stare back, dumbfounded. Suddenly, it lifts into the air and zooms across my yard flying into the setting sun.

October 18, 2019

“Why men grEat ‘till they gotta be GREAT.”

The sound of Lizzo’s iconic summer of 2019 song “Truth Hurts” echoes through the two-story rental my three friends live in. The house stands about seven minutes off of Ball State’s campus and has typical college rental characteristics: creaky floors, sticky surfaces from spilled alcohol, and a standard creepy basement that everyone refuses to go into (unless drunkenly trying to prove their bravery). My friend Mary, who is always in charge of the music, has put on her “warm-up bitches” playlist. It’s curated specifically for getting dressed up and putting on makeup as we slug back glasses of cheap wine in preparation for a night out at the bars. Excited energy sizzles through the air as the next line of the song bursts from Mary’s television speaker. “I just took a DNA test. Turns out I’m 100% THAT BITCH even when I’m crying CRAZY.”

We all burst out singing in succession, keeping up with the rapidly increasing pace of the song. Six various friends stand in the small hallway between the three bedrooms as everyone gets ready to go out to the bars. I’m in my friend Sam’s bedroom lying on her bed as I watch her put on makeup and sing along to the music. She stands up suddenly and starts dancing with one of our other friends, her body moving smoothly and surprisingly with the exciting music in the air. Everyone in this house is a dance major except for me. I don’t know how I ended up in this group, being as disconnected from my own body as I often feel.

“SHOTS!” I hear someone cry out as I look over to the door to see Emily walking in with a bottle of tequila in her hands. She unscrews the lid and throws her head back as she allows the liquid to waterfall down into her mouth. She swallows and hands it to Sam, who brings the bottle to her lips, probably in an attempt to not miss and ruin the makeup she’s just put on. She hands the bottle to me and smiles.

“Drink up, buttercup!” she says brightly before turning back to the mirror and beginning to work on her hair. I bring the bottle to my lips and take a long, sustained sip. I throw as much of the fiery liquid into my mouth and down my throat as quickly as possible, in hopes of getting it into my body before my stomach or my mind registers the taste and protests. I hand the bottle to the next outstretched hand and lie back down, allowing the feeling of fire to travel down my throat and sit comfortably in my stomach, like a warm hug.

My hands rest on either side of my head, bent like a cactus, as I feel the tingling of alcohol slowly massage the tension of my mind and body. I can feel my brain releasing and my body melting beneath me. I sigh deeply and start laughing at nothing. God, it feels good to feel like a normal, dumb 21-year-old for the night. Not the grief-stricken granddaughter of a murderer and murder victim or the responsible daughter of a cancer patient. I get to forget everything for the moment: the death, sickness, responsibility, and gravity of life. Lizzo’s song ends and the next one has begun without my noticing, it’s Carly Rae Jepsen’s “Happy Not Knowing.” The lyrics push through the alcoholic film surrounding my brain and I open my eyes:

I'll turn your love away 'cause I want to sleep at night

It's just that my broken heart is my alibi

I'm afraid, afraid, afraid, afraid of knowing

What I'm knowing, what I'm knowing

I'm happy not knowing

I take a deep breath and sit back up. The freedom of drunken idiocy dissipates, and my brain takes charge again. You’re just trying to escape from it all and you know it. I run my fingers through my hair as I watch the room without seeing it. Am I trying to escape the deaths? Or did the egregious find me in a year that was meant to be happy, dumb, and playful? And does

it matter? So what if I'm trying to escape it, wouldn't anybody? If I have to sit and simmer in a pot of grief every day how can I expect to survive that? Then the searing question brands the inside of my brain tissue: What would Grandma think?

My head drops forward and I feel my brain sloshing along with the alcohol in my stomach. She didn't like drinking; I don't think I ever saw her drink. She was as strongly Christian as I am strongly not. I never would have told her about this even if she were still alive, she'd be disappointed. A small thought starts to tingle in the back of my head as I raise it back up to look across the room. She had been living in a cage for the last twenty years of her life with a man she despised. She absorbed his politics, his opinions, and bore the brunt of his tempers. He controlled her up until the last moment of her life by taking it himself. I won't be controlled by anyone, not even their opinions. I want to be my own. I want to be free like my grandma wasn't. I feel like I owe that to her.

I hear a familiar chant and my eyes focus as I look out into the small hallway, listening. It starts in Mary's room and flows into Sam's like a wave of sound as our friends in the hallway join in:

“LET’S!”

“GO!”

“TO THE BARS!”

“LET’S GO TO THE BARS!!”

I smile again as Sam stands up excitedly and pulls me up from the bed. We all start walking down the creaky stairs as everyone claps along to the chant and stomps across the house. We open the door and walk out into the chilled October night. The smell of crinkling leaves fills

the air with a crisp freshness as each of them falls to the earth. Our yells and voices cascade into the night.

December 18, 2019

“The stories we tell also tell us. They are mirrors that move and sometimes change and sometimes they tell more than we wish they would”

-Pádraig Ó Tuama (233).

“Lisa! You have to keep your eyes on the road!” My friend’s partner, Anna, yells at her from the backseat of our rental car.

“But I want to see it!” My friend Lisa yells next to me in her Swedish accent. My eyes are fixed on a blurry line of light that cascades across the arctic of Sweden and my mouth opens in an awed smile. That blurry light is the reason I flew twelve hours to Sweden, took an eighteen-hour train ride to the northern tip of the country, and then rode in my friend’s rental car another couple of hours to reach the small town of Abisko, Sweden. Abisko is famous for being one of the best places to see the northern lights. Why else would I fly to Sweden in late December? I’m not one to seek out punishment.

Abisko sits right at the tip of Sweden and on the border of Norway. There’s no grocery store, only a small gas station with packaged foods found inside. Snow covers the ground and the temperature is a balmy seven degrees Fahrenheit once the sun goes down around 1 PM. Lisa, Anna, and I had to rent massive overalls, boots, and coats from a ski rental company nearby. I felt like a giant Oompa Loompa as I waddled everywhere I needed to go while wearing it, but it was the only thing that could keep me warm in that weather.

Lisa drives up a small, icy, and winding road lit only by the car’s headlamps. I met Lisa during my gap year before college, at a French-language school in Bordeaux, France. She’s nine years my senior, but she’s remained a dear friend of mine for the past three years. We’ll send

postcards back and forth and meet up for trips. I love traveling with her as she's always up for the adventure and enjoying the small things in life. My eyes peer around corners in fear that a car will come bounding down the road, unable to stop.

I look over my shoulder through the window and see the faint ribbon of light cascading off into the darkened distance. We have to get away from the already minimal light pollution of Abisko if we want to see the full effects of the northern lights. Lisa and I planned this four-day trip to Abisko just so we could hopefully catch a glimpse of this natural wonder. I've heard of a couple that had visited six different locations around the world in hopes of spotting the lights, but they still hadn't seen them. It's a matter of chance and we're the lucky ones.

We'd gone snowshoeing earlier that day during the three-hour period of time when the sun rises and casts a dusky light across the landscape. Our tour guide had given us chocolate and lingonberry tea when we reached the summit of a small hill. The heat of the teacup he handed me warmed my numbed fingertips as he told us about a small resort a little further north of Abisko that had some of the best viewing areas for the lights.

"There have been a lot of sunspots this morning already," he says in his Spanish accent before pulling off his cap, revealing a luxurious mane of golden, brown hair. "You should head up to the mountain about twenty minutes north of here. There's a resort there that has some of the best viewing areas around."

We heeded his advice as the car continued weaving up the resort's treacherous road. Once we reached the parking lot we all jumped out as quickly as possible and started running up the nearby hill into the darkness.

My feet tread through the deep snow as I struggle forward, panting. I don't stop to rest, fearing that I'll lose my momentum on the steep hill. My feet continually reach forward across

the darkening snow when I hear Lisa let out a small cry behind me. I quickly look back and see the mixing of clear green and purple lights cascade across the sky in a long string, reaching out into the dark night. It looks like the images on postcards. I laugh and push forward until I finally reach the peak of the hill.

The snow is even deeper up here and the wind whips the strands of hair peeking out from under my beanie. I've lost the shielded protection of the mountain face. I pull up my hood and zip my jacket all the way up to my chin. The dark outline of a forest of pine trees reach towards the glittering sky and encircle the little clearing we now stand in. I look up.

There they are. The lights some say are filled with dancing spirits. I can see why. The purple and green shimmer across the night sky and the stars. The neon green is the stronger of the two colors, but the purple shimmers along the edges of the green as it twirls across the sky as if someone were painting it there. The locals would later tell us the light's appearance was an eight out of ten. My friends and I would later laugh at our dumb luck.

The cold air has frozen the snot in my nose and I feel the biting cold reaching underneath my Oompa Loompa jacket as I begin to shiver. In my haste to get dressed and see the lights, I'd only thrown my jacket and overalls on over my short-sleeved pajamas and I'd forgotten my gloves. I shove my ice-block hands into my pockets and continue to just stare in wonder at the ballet in front of my eyes as it freely moves in one direction or another. The colors flow in and out of one another, creating new, smaller lines or combining to create gigantic beams of light that fill with brightening colors. I can hear Lisa and Anna laughing and joyfully yelling as they try to take pictures and point at the lights above their heads. They speak Swedish to one another and I just laugh at the joy of the moment, the life that surrounds us.

While some say the lights are dancing spirits, others say that they contain our deceased relatives and ancestors as they trek across the sky and watch us. Small tears form in my eyes and a large lump in my throat forms as the moment fills me up with an unexplainable feeling. It isn't sadness or simple joy, but a fullness, a largeness of understanding of what it means to live. Not just be alive, but to live. I hadn't realized how empty my body had felt until that moment, how lifeless. The fullness makes me feel as if I might explode or throw up, maybe both, as feelings, emotions, and understandings flood through me in a waterfalling cascade so fast that I can't name it.

I turn to look in the other direction as the never-ending wind seems to drive right through me, biting my face as it goes. A strong, green line slides across the sky and down over to the other side of the Earth towards Norway. I stand staring as it shimmers across the tips of pine trees and below the stars when a thought as clear as the icy wind pops into my head. *I want to be better. I want to seek the things in life that are worthwhile and not just the pleasures that get me through a day. It's time to change. I'm ready now.* An even greater gust of wind blows me back and I finally have to turn back around to watch the shimmering lights reaching out over the resort and Abisko.

Warm energy begins growing in my solar plexus and reaching up through my body. A smile grows across my face. More tears sneak into my eyes before I let out a massive howl that starts low before reaching up into higher and higher octaves. My friends join in as we all howl into the icy night and biting wind. After I run out of breath and voice I laugh and close my eyes only to see the patterns of the green and purple lights engraved on my eyelids. It's time to live again.

Afterword

My dad had his final chemo treatments and surgery in February of 2020, which gave him and his immune system ample time to recover from the treatments before the Coronavirus pandemic hit, which we are all incredibly grateful for. The doctors have declared him cancer-free.

My family plans to have a memorial for my grandma and grandpa in late June, pandemic-permitting, in their childhood home of Baliton, Minnesota. It will be a small ceremony and we intend to bury her with her mother, father, and deceased sisters. We plan to bury him between his own two parents. Whatever happens after death, we hope that they will find peace and rest with their long-dead family members and with themselves.

In all honesty, I struggled writing this piece as it forced me to contend with my own feelings of grief and regret again and again with each revision and read-through. There were days where I would write freely for hours and then the next morning, I would look at myself in the mirror and just say I cannot do it today. I cannot talk about her (my grandma) today. The end product is something I feel proud of and it catches the honesty of my feelings to my current, greatest understanding of them. Although, like everything, they are liable to change.

Works Cited

Didion, Joan. *The Year of Magical Thinking*. 1st ed., Knopf, 2005.

Oliver, Mary. *New and Selected Poems, Volume One*. Beacon Press, 1992.

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Two Towers: Being the Second Part of the Lord of the Rings*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014.

Tuama Padraig Ó. *In the Shelter: Finding a Home in the World*. Hodder, 2016.

Annotated Bibliography for
Twenty-One: An Age of Body, Grief, and Threshold

Didion, Joan. *The Year of Magical Thinking* . 1st ed., Knopf, 2005

Joan Didion's book explores her year of dealing with the sudden and unexpected death of her husband. She relates her experiences of grief and how she came to understand the loss of a loved one. I will use this source to further inform my sections dealing with grief as I write about my own coming to terms with the event.

Diamant, Anita. *The Red Tent*. Picador, 2017.

This source is a fiction piece that tells the story of Dinah, the daughter of Jacob in the Bible, as well as the story of her mothers. It is a novel that reaches into the heart of the sacredness of womanhood and the female body. I will be using lines from this book in my essay on Body as it explores an ancient relationship with women's bodies and was a catalyst of change in the way I viewed my own body.

Gibran, Kahlil. *The Prophet* Kahlil Gibran. Rupa, 1993.

This source is filled with a series of prose poetry each dealing with specific subjects such as love and freedom in a very philosophical and lyrical way. I will be quoting from the pieces "On Joy & Sorrow" as well as "On Death," in hopes of further informing my essays on Grief and Threshold.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *A Wizard of Earthsea*. Gollancz, 2019.

This novel is a piece of fiction where Ursula K. Le Guin explored a school child's question of how do great, wise wizards become that way? It follows the story of Ged as he tries to grow into a powerful wizard despite the harrowing shadow he unleashed that now haunts him. This novel deals with difficult aspects of growing up and truly encountering the self, including the parts of us we might not want to see. I will be quoting this piece specifically in my essay on Thresholds as it delves into these points of external and internal transition.

Neville, Susan S. *Indiana Winter*. Indiana University Press, 1994.

Indiana Winter is a creative nonfiction piece that explores life in Indiana through unique creative nonfiction stylizations that are rather exploratory and unusual. I am using this resource as a developmental piece to help me build an understanding of creative nonfiction as an art form as well as an exploratory piece to inspire different ways I could write about my chosen topics.

Popova, Maria. *Figuring*. Pantheon Books., 2019.

This source is a creative nonfiction piece that follows the lives of a series of masterful thinkers such as Emily Dickinson, Margaret Fuller, and Rachel Carson not only through their work but through their personal lives and writings. There are many topics dealt with throughout its pages but there are chapters that talk about

different forms of grief and transition within each historical figure's life. I will use these writings and quotes within my own pieces exploring grief and threshold.

Talese, Gay, and Barbara Lounsberry. *Writing Creative Nonfiction: The Literature of Reality*. HarperCollins College Publishers, 1996.

Talese and Lounsberry's textbook is a series of lessons that exemplify different ways of writing creative nonfiction using examples of great creative nonfiction writers/pieces and then explaining their methodology. I will use this source to help me experiment with and develop my own creative nonfiction style through exercises and examples. It will also teach me about the history of creative nonfiction as a literary and academic subject.

Tippett, Krista. *Becoming Wise*. Constable and Robinson, 2017.

In this source, Krista Tippett asks questions about the art of living in interviews from her podcast, *On Being*. She has a specific chapter dedicated to the body and how great poets, writers, and public figures encounter their own multi-faceted relationship to their bodies. I will be using this specific chapter in my essay on "Body" in order to bring in the voices of other people and how they choose to think of or experience their bodies in the modern age.

Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Two Towers: Being the Second Part of the Lord of the Rings*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014.

Tolkien's second novel in *The Lord of the Rings* is about a fantasy creature called a Hobbit that walks out of his front door to go on a journey that he knows will change

his way of life forever for the sake of a better future. This first book deals heavily both with a tragic loss of a beloved character/friend and the subsequent grief among the characters in the novel. It is also very conscious of the importance of thresholds and the choice to cross them despite lingering fear of the unknown. I will use this book specifically in my essays on thresholds and grief as it holds lyrical prose that deliberate on these specific topics.

Tuama Pádraig Ó. *In the Shelter: Finding a Home in the World*. Hodder, 2016.

This source is a memoir that deals heavily with thresholds and immense grief as the author tries to come to terms with his own sexuality and the implications that has on his community, sense of self, and spirituality. The book is full of observations about existing in the world and becomes very pertinent when the author talks about how he dealt with the grief of his best friend's suicide while marooned halfway across the world from his home. This source will factor both into the personal experience of my grief essay as it played an important factor in my own story and it will also supplement my explanation and understandings of grief throughout the essay.